

145th observance of Memorial Day

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Nearly 150 years ago after the American Civil War (1861-1865), Memorial Day, as it is now known, was established as a way to remember the sacrifice of the fallen.

The tradition was first known as "Decoration Day" because the graves of our military dead were decorated with tokens of flowers, wreaths, and flags.

The custom of remembering the dead with grave side rituals has long been a hallmark of human society. Because of this shared humanity, these memorial observances were not isolated to a particular region but occurred in both the South and the North.

Ceremonies and speeches after the Civil War had included much rhetoric and lamentation of a cruel enemy's prosecution of unjust war, on both sides.

With the passage of time, these ceremonies set aside the sectional differences and Soldiers in blue and grey were honored alike.

The first Memorial Day celebration, originally called Decoration Day, is credited to Boalsburg, Pa, according to local historians. The ceremony took place on July 4, 1864 when local women there decorated Soldier's graves.

In actuality, the first informal observance occurred with the

Civil War's first casualty. Soon after the war, the federal government began a program to consolidate the Union war dead into national military cemeteries.

Nearly 300,000 Union dead were re-interred in 73 national cemeteries by 1870, the most famous of which are Gettysburg, Pa. where President Abraham Lincoln gave his immortal address, and Arlington, Va., the former home of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee.

A portion of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address sums up the essence of today's Memorial Day; "—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

In the North, the champion of the new custom was Union veteran, Gen. John A. Logan. After the war, he commanded the Grand Army of the Republic, a large and politically powerful, veteran's organization. With this authority, Logan issued a proclamation on May 5, 1868, stating that Decoration Day should be observed on May 30th annually throughout the nation.

He was a long time politician from before the war. His actions



Give pause and... FORGET THEM NOT

and service as a commander in the Union Army of the Tennessee were widely known and respected. Logan even commissioned a painting championing himself as the Hero of the Battle of Atlanta, fought in August 1864, as a promotional for his unsuccessful bid for Vice President of the United States on a ticket with James G. Blaine in the 1884 election. He died just two years later in 1886; currently the painting is housed in the [Cyclorama](#) in Atlanta's Grant Park.

In the South, Decoration Day was celebrated at the war's end with family reunions, outdoor pick-nicks, and grave side religious services. Women's organizations, like the United Daughters of the Confederacy, were one of the main drivers to adopt Decoration Day and raised money to erect monuments and rebury Confederate dead. Later, in the early 20th Century, Decoration Day came to increasingly be called "Memorial Day" as the Indian Wars, the Spanish American War, the Philippine Insurrection, and World War I were added to the annals of U.S. military history.

By the World War II era, the holiday was widely called Memorial Day but the name change was not official until 1967. The day is also marked by lowering the U.S. flag to half-staff, a visible symbol of mourning, until noon when it is fully raised again.

Across America and in cemeteries on foreign soil where American service members are interred, Soldiers and volunteers

walk through these cemeteries, placing flags on graves. Ironically, also on Memorial Day weekend, war movies play on our television sets and the Indianapolis 500 auto race is held.

In recent years, Memorial Day offered many people time away from work as a family holiday amidst the symbols of flags and flowers.

There are two major reasons for Memorial Day's current date: late May is considered the best time for flowers to be in bloom and this time of year also marks the unofficial start of summer and warm weather suitable for cookouts.

Today, Memorial Day is celebrated on the final Monday in May, and is used to honor all of our nation's war dead while Veteran's Day honors the surviving servicemen and women.

The celebration is rooted in the communal outpouring of solemn grief and a need to commemorate the loss of so many of our men, and increasingly women, to America's history of military conflict.

As Americans, we have been touched by war; we all have family and extended family that have numbered among the ranks of the United States Armed Forces, whatever the uniform. Most of them have returned, but many have not. Join me in keeping those who were lost in our thoughts. Give pause and forget them not, because they were Americans every one! ☪

